

I claim:

1. A merchandise return system for a plurality of remote merchandisers comprising:

an outsource providing the plurality of merchandisers with out-sourced merchandise-return information services, comprising merchandise-return information storage means for storing merchandise-return information applicable to merchandise of the merchandisers; and

a distributed community of point-of-return associates, linked to the merchandise-return information storage means by a communications medium, for physically processing returns of sold merchandise submitted to the point-of-return associates if authorized after application to the merchandise-return information storage means.

2. The merchandise return system of claim 1 wherein:

the merchandise-return information stored on the storage means includes information on original sales transactions by which a given merchandiser fulfilled or caused fulfillment of orders of merchandise.

3. The merchandise return system of claim 2 further comprising:
merchandise identifiers attached to returnable units of merchandise during or before order fulfillment wherein the identifiers facilitate research of information in the merchandise-return information storage means.

4. The merchandise return system of claim 1 wherein the plurality of remote merchandisers deal in a wide variety of differing goods and the distributed community of point-of-return associates generally provide retail mail, parcel and shipping services generally not directly competitive with the goods of the merchandisers.

5. The merchandise return system of claim 1 wherein the outsource and at least some of the distributed community of point-of-return associates are part of a common organization.

6. The merchandise return system of claim 1 wherein the merchandise-return information storage means in part includes access to portions of at least one storage means controlled by at least one of the plurality of remote merchants.

7. A merchandise-return information system servicing a plurality of distributed point-of-return associates through a communications medium, comprising:

merchandise-return information storage means for storing merchandise-return information pertaining to the merchandise of a plurality of remote merchandisers, including pertinent return-authorization criteria; and

processing means, activated by a request from a point-of-return associate combined with at least an identifying designation of the merchandise presented for return to the point-of-return associate, for serving a return-authorization message.

13. The merchandise return system of claim 7 wherein the merchandise-return information storage means in part includes access to portions of at least one storage means controlled by at least one of the plurality of remote merchants.

14. A merchandise return system comprising:

a merchandise-return information resource serving a plurality of distributed point-of-return associates and another plurality of remote merchandisers;

a processing system associated with the information resource and linked with communication devices of the point-of-return associates by a communications medium, for processing requests for merchandise-return information on merchandise presented to the point-of-return associates; and

means for serving responsive communications to the communication devices of the requesting point-of-return associates.

15. The merchandise return system of claim 14 wherein the responsive communications include either a positive or negative return decision and, in cases of positive return decisions, further comprise return fulfillment instructions.

16. The merchandise return system of claim 14 wherein the responsive communications include either a positive or negative return decision and, in cases of positive return decisions, further comprise an award instruction applicable to the party presenting the return merchandise or else another party, which award instruction can be chosen from any of instant credit, credit provisional that the merchandiser certifies the propriety of the return upon a later date or event, credit honored by a given association of merchants only, a direct refund in cash or equivalent, and/or any combinations thereof.

17. The merchandise return system of claim 14 further comprising:

merchandise identifiers attached to returnable units of merchandise during or before the original sales transaction therefor wherein the identifiers facilitate the processing system in forming a responsive communication.

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